A Future Teacher Examines Jesus as Teacher

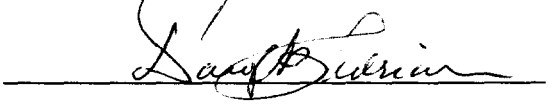
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Robert A. McCord

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Daryl B. Adrian



Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

April, 1993

Expected date of graduation
May 8, 1993

Purpose of Thesis

This thesis examines Jesus' role as teacher, his teaching style and methodology, his audience, and his teaching environment. As a social studies education major at Ball State University, I have learned much about educational theory and teaching methods. As a student teacher, a Sunday School teacher, and even a substitute teacher, I have learned much about my own teaching style, methodology, and philosophy. It is in the light of what I have learned through these experiences that I examine Jesus as teacher.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Dr. Daryl B. Adrian, my thesis advisor, for his encouragement, helpful advice, guidance, enthusiasm, and patience. Thanks to Alexandria-Monroe High School, the school where I student taught, and specifically to English teacher Mrs. Barb Abernathy for her generous assistance in final layout and formatting. Deepest and most heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Toni. Without her encouragement and unwavering support this project would have never been completed. Finally, the greatest thanks goes to Jesus Christ. His example is my goal. His teaching is my guide.

H.G. Wells referred to Jesus Christ as "easily the most dominant figure in history" (Fosdick 50). Regardless of what one believes about Jesus as Son of God, Messiah, prophet, revolutionary, healer, or ambitious king, it is difficult to dispute Wells' statement of Jesus' place in history. Equally difficult to dispute is the fact that, although there are many roles we could attach to Jesus, he was a teacher. The four Gospels agree in so representing him (Mark 5:35; Matt. 12:38; Luke 18:18). Friend and foe alike thus spoke of him and thus addressed him. The Fourth Gospel represents Martha as telling her sister Mary, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you" (11:28). This same writing suggests that the two inquiring followers of John the Baptist (1:38) called Jesus rabbi, which means "teacher," and that the weeping Mary at the tomb (20:16) addressed him as rabboni, which also means "teacher" (Laymon 121). The greek word most often used in the Gospels to describe what Jesus did is some form of the verb διδάσκω , which means "teach" (Weigle 14).

Glover writes in his book, The Jesus of History (84), that "[Jesus] dealt with men, he taught and influenced them, and it is worth our study to understand how he did it—to master his methods" (Horne preface). In this paper I will examine Jesus' teaching methods, as well as discuss other aspects of his teaching, such as his teaching style, audience awareness, and teaching environment. I will also examine what I as a future educator can learn from this master teacher and to what extent Jesus' methodology, style, etc. compares to my own studies in educational theories and my limited experiences as a student teacher, substitute teacher, and Sunday School teacher.

To explore Jesus' role as teacher we must answer the questions "What did it mean to be a rabbi at that time?" and "What was Jesus like compared to other rabbis, or teachers, of his day?" The word rabbi means "my great one", "my master", as well as "teacher", and is a term of great respect (Derrett 55). Jesus was called "teacher" based on his teaching activities rather than any intellectual preparation in the synagogues or recognized official position in Jewish society (Tilden 163). The position of rabbi in Jewish society was held by rich,

politically eminent men who taught the Law, the moral and religious code handed down from the time of Moses. They not only taught the Law through strict, word perfect memorization and rehearsal but also interpreted it, enforced it, and judged people according to it (Derrett 146). Gunther Bornkamm describes the distinguishing characteristics of Jesus as rabbi in his book Jesus of Nazareth:

> This rabbi differs considerably from the other members of his class. Even external facts reveal this difference. Jesus does not only teach in the synagogues, but also in the open field, on the shores of the lake, during his wanderings. And his followers are a strange crowd. Even those people are amongst them whom an official rabbi would do his best to avoid: women and children, tax collectors and sinners. Above all his manner of teaching differs profoundly from that of the other rabbis. A rabbi is an interpreter of Scripture. This lends authority to his office, an authority which has to prove itself from the given letter of Scripture...Their authority is thus always a derived authority. Jesus' teaching, on the other hand, never consists merely in the interpretation of an authoritatively given sacred text, not even when words from Scripture are quoted. (57)

Matthew's gospel reinforces this last point: "...the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority, and not as the teachers of the law" (7:28-29). In other words, Jesus was not like the teachers of the Law in the authority of his teaching as well as in his teaching environment and style.

As Bornkamm mentions, Jesus' teaching atmosphere was a varied one. He taught on the hillside (Matt. 5:1, 24:3), standing in a boat pushed out from shore (Mark 4:1), along the highway (Mark 10:17), inside a home (Luke 5:19), and in the synagogues (Luke 4:16). Laymon suggests that Jesus must have been deep-chested and vigorous in his delivery in order to be able to speak to such large crowds in the open (122). And those whose attention he commanded were, as Bornkamm puts it, a "strange crowd." As

we will see later, virtually no one was excluded from Jesus' teaching. Jesus was no respecter of persons. Rich and poor, young and old, man and woman, Jew and Gentile were found as students of Jesus. A description of his students and of his teaching atmosphere can be stated in two words: anyone, anywhere.

Style may be defined as a "characteristic mode of expression" (Webster's Dictionary). Teaching style can thus be considered the "characteristic mode" in which a teacher teaches. In other words, it is the general manner in which a teacher chooses to teach. Any teacher's style has its own characteristics and those characteristics dictate the methods which will be utilized. Jesus' teaching style can be observed as having at least three characteristics: natural, picturesque, and clear (Branscomb 103-108). His methods reflect these characteristics.

Jesus' teaching was natural, not formal. We never read of his having delivered a prepared address at a formal occasion. His teaching showed none of the planned character of a formal oration or sermon. However, this does not mean that systematic thinking did not precede his teaching or that it was carelessly put together. One might say that it could be described by the words, "ordered spontaniety" (Laymon 124). Rarely, if ever, did he announce a service for which he had a prepared sermon. Most of his teaching seems to have been extempore, and therefore completely informal. The occasion arose, and he spoke and taught what he had in mind (Branscomb 103). Unexpected remarks by a passer-by (Matt. 19:3), chance meetings along the way (Mark 10:17), sudden questions from the disciples (Luke 11:1)—these were typical of the occasions which prompted Jesus' teaching. Possibly there were times when he knew he was expected to comment upon the lesson at synagogue. In such cases, he may have prepared his messages in advance. By and large, however, Jesus depended upon the developments of the day at hand to determine what he would say (Laymon 124).

Another example of Jesus' informality was his natural ability to be at ease with all sorts of persons. During Jesus' time, caste lines were sharply drawn

and stiff conventionalities limited social intercourse between the sexes (Fosdick 53). Fosdick states:

> He ate alike with Simon, the Pharisee, and with tax collectors and sinners...alike in public and in private he associated with men and women on equal terms. He was at home with little children in their innocence and strangely enough at home too with conscience-stricken grafters like Zacchaeus. Respectable home-keeping women, such as Mary and Martha, could talk with him with natural frankness, but courtesans also sought him out as though assured that he would understand and befriend them. He lost from his discipleship the "rich young ruler" but Mark says he "loved him" and, as for the poor, his heart was always theirs. He was a loyal Jew, yet in a good Samaritan he portrayed incarnate unselfishness, and in a Roman centurion he found more faith than he had found in Israel. (53)

Jesus did not allow social standards to keep him from communicating with and teaching anyone. He was a teacher for all pupils and did not let race, gender, wealth, or social status keep him from teaching. Tilden states, "He shows a readiness to meet people in their own level of interest or concern, and he must in some way have radiated an atmosphere of approachableness" (171).

Among the teaching methods Jesus embraced, the method of interviewing and conversation can be seen as a tool or as an extension of his natural, informal style. He utilized one-on-one conversations to create a teaching experience. Branscomb comments, "Some of his greatest teaching was done in the ordinary give-and-take of mealtime conversation, or in answering questions individuals asked" (104). An excellent example of this is Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Two things stand out in this occurence. The first is Jesus' willingness to speak to the woman. In his day the woman of Samaria, who had had five husbands and now was living with a man who was not her husband, would never have been addressed by a Jewish rabbi, but Jesus had no regard for

such barriers (Fosdick 151). John's gospel tells us that Jesus' disciples "were surprised to find him talking with a woman" (4:27). Utilizing a conversational method of instruction, Jesus addressed her seven times and six times she responded. Jesus began the conversation in a casual and unassuming way by asking for a drink from the well. He then, almost shrewdly, used a give-and-take conversation to teach concepts about the Kingdom of God—his primary subject matter. It was as though his objective was to teach, no matter the situation. Tilden comments, "Jesus' method was to get people talking. He then tried to lead them to think more deeply than they had thought before" (171). In contemporary terms, this educational process is described as leading students to a higher-level of self-analysis and critical thinking (Bloom's Taxonomy).

As a social studies teaching major, a Sunday school teacher, a substitute teacher, and a student teacher, I feel strongly that much can be gained by studying Jesus' natural, informal style of teaching. Perhaps I feel so strongly because I myself use this same style in my teaching. While many teaching styles have merit and value and I do not claim to be a master teacher (for I am still only an apprentice), my teaching philosophy does reflect this approach. The most significant aspect of Jesus' teaching was that he minimized the distance between himself as teacher and his hearers. In what he did and said he did not construct a formal situation in which he communicated, "I am your teacher. You are my students. I am going to teach now. Now you will learn." Instead he drew on the inspiration of the moment. Branscomb states it this way: "He did not speak to the crowds of fisherfolk and peasants in the logical manner of a professor lecturing [in] a classroom. Nowhere do you find definitions of terms, premises laid down, deductions drawn" (105).

The best teacher is the one under whom students learn without realizing they are being taught. This can be possible by interacting on the same level as one's students (as Jesus did) by showing genuine concern and interest in their lives, by having an air of approachableness about oneself, and by always being ready to maximize a teaching opportunity when it arrives, possibly during everyday

conversation. This may seem difficult in the more formal environment of the school or classroom; but, I believe it is very possible. For instance, while student teaching I created an air of approachableness about myself that allowed students to feel free to speak with me. I did not see this as an opportunity to become "buddy-buddy" with the students but rather to teach them, to precipitate higher-level thinking and decision-making about themselves, society, etc. Jesus was, and I strive to be, a teacher at all times, prepared, alert, and flexible. Being a teacher is not simply an occupation, but a consuming way of life.

As a part of my education curriculum at Ball State University I took a class entitled, "Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society". The focus of this class was to help prevent me and other future teachers from being discriminatory in any way against students, their families, or co-workers. Jesus' teaching style was consistent with such a non-discriminatory style of teaching. He did not allow class, age, gender, race, or ethnicity to dictate his teaching or whom he taught. It is a tragedy if any teacher allows any of these to hinder or influence his or her teaching. I personally think few things are more important than the necessity of treating students fairly and equally and with respect no matter their socioeconomic status, race, age, gender, or ethnic background. Such just treatment will indirectly teach students the lesson of a lifetime—that discrimination and prejudice are wrong. And this Jesus did in all situations.

Jesus' teaching style can also be described as Branscomb notes, "picturesque, full of figures, illustrations, striking expressions, all of which made the meaning so clear that even the most ignorant could understand" (107). Indeed Jesus expressed himself so that he held the attention of his listeners, who sometimes numbered in the thousands and listened for hours on end. "He did not use the vocabulary of a religious functionary," Laymon writes (126). Instead Jesus used real-life, everyday examples, exaggeration,

hyperbole, metaphors, similes, and parables to make his point and solidify it in his pupils' memories.

Hyperbole, the use of exaggerated, extravagant statements, was exercised masterfully by Jesus to teach. Those who heard him teach could visualize in their minds' eyes the vivid images of people with logs in their eyes attempting to remove specks from others' eyes (Matt. 7:3-5); men straining out gnats and swallowing camels (Matt. 23:24); people plucking out their eyes and cutting off their hands in order to escape hell (Mark 9:43-47); dead men burying dead men (Matt. 8:22); a mountain, because someone prayed that it be done, being "taken up and cast into the sea" (Mark 11:23). Fosdick writes:

> Jesus' speech was packed with energy—vehement, vigorous, exuberant, often extravagant...Hyperbole was his native language...There is no mistaking the kind of person who speaks like that. Young, dynamic, tremendously in earnest, such a person the crowds heard, and were convinced that something unique in their experience was happening. (52)

Jesus also employed metaphor and simile to make his teaching more concrete. Some examples include: "I send you out as sheep among wolves" (Luke 10:3); "Be as wise as serpents, and as harmless as doves" (Matt. 10:16); "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings" (Luke 13:34); "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13) (Brancomb 107). Instead of using abstract terms to describe concepts or conditions, Jesus uses concrete terms that incite meaningful visual images in the minds of his listeners.

The most striking and best known of Jesus' teaching methods was also an outgrowth of his picturesque style—the parable. A parable is a brief story with a moral or religious meaning. While we can not say that Jesus invented the parable, his substantial use of it was unprecedented in Judaism. Scholars have found only a handful in the Old Testament. The Gospels record sixty-five instances in which Jesus taught using a parable (Hinson 80). His use of

parables was so extensive that Matthew makes special mention of the fact: "Jesus spoke all these things to the crowds in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable" (13:34). Jesus' parables are brief but dramatic and colorful. They present lifelike situations and true-to-life experiences, such as one might meet anytime in first-century Palestine. A farmer builds larger barns to accommodate an increased crop (Luke 12:16-21); a guest arrives at a wedding banquet improperly dressed (Matt. 22:1-14); a traveler gets robbed on the highway (Luke 10:29-37)—these are only three examples of the occasions which provide material for Jesus' parables. Laymon comments on Jesus' use of parables:

> In light of the fact that Jesus put none of his teachings into writing but counted on the impression they made upon the minds of those who heard them, his selection of the parable form was a fortunate one. The people would not forget easily these fascinating stories. They could readily be repeated at family gatherings or while walking along the dusty road engaging a friend or chance acquaintance in conversation. (129)

The parable, as well as the other methods mentioned above, actively engaged Jesus' listeners in visualization while concretely setting in their minds vivid images to teach them the meanings of abstract concepts such as prayer, the Kingdom of God, or forgiveness.

One of the most constant and challenging tasks that a teacher faces is communicating abstract, difficult to understand ideas in ways that are understood by students. I believe Jesus met this challenge in a way that also teaches me how to better meet it. Jesus, who frequently dealt with lofty, abstract subject matter, showed proficient ability to bring the loftiest of ideas down to earth by packaging his teaching in vivid, exciting language, striking illustrations, and real-life, everyday examples. I feel this is a valuable method for me to master.

This aspect of Jesus' picturesque style has been echoed in my teaching methods classes at Ball State. The practice of taking what students do not know (the subject matter) and applying it (by analogy) in some way to what they do know has been a widely encouraged one. The schema theory of reading and language comprehension reinforces this. In this way readers and listeners activate existing knowledge structures (schema) to interpret text either read or heard. Comprehension involves the matching of what the reader or listener already knows to a new message (Vacca, Vacca 15). Jesus definitely matched his message to what his students already knew, e.g. farming, weather, seasons, travel, etc. Rhein writes, "Today his methods have been given a title—experience centered. Modern education has seen the need for relating instruction to life. Otherwise it often remains meaningless" (56).

Derrett describes the populace that formed Jesus' audience as "impatient of abstracts, insistent upon practical relevance, eager to be entertained as well as instructed" (143). This description could easily be used to describe the populace of America's high school students today. Teachers are but one voice trying to be heard amid the din of television, movies, video games, music, and other entertainment that resounds in the world of the secondary school student. As it was for Jesus, picturesque, vivid, exciting, gripping language is a valuable tool to capture and keep the attention of students. "Eager to be entertained" does indeed describe today's students, as does "insistent upon practical relevance." Countless students have asked teachers countless times, "When are we ever going to use this in real life?" If a teacher can actively engage and enthrall students, as Jesus did, such questions will be few and far between.

Finally it can be said that Jesus' teaching was clear and easy to understand, not hidden or difficult to comprehend. This has been implied throughout the aforementioned. In his conversations, his discourses, his parables, and throughout his teaching, Jesus never left his listeners wondering what he meant or what he was really trying to say. Huge crowds of ordinary men, women, and children would spend all day listening to him, even forgetting their lunch in the

eagerness with which they hung upon his words. From that fact alone we might infer that what he said was lucid, clear, easily understood (Bronscomb 108). Rhein writes:

> Throughout, his style remains simple—never wordy. Each sentence, each word is chosen for a purpose and speaks directly to the point...His examples are well chosen for his audience. Simple, homely images abound for his flock of nomads. The political issues of the day are turned into moral teachings. (56)

Indeed throughout his teaching we never read of Jesus "beating around the bush" or not getting to the point. He teaches not with intellectual, lofty rhetoric but with popular, down-to-earth language appropriate for the particular audience.

Examples of this characteristic of Jesus' teaching can be found in the various methods already dicussed as well as in the multitude of short, pithy, almost proverbial statements he is recorded to have made, for example,

"Love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Matt. 22:39).

"Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's" (Mark 12:17).

"Judge not lest you be judged" (Matt. 7:1).

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matt. 7:12).

Laymon states, "Statements such as these were likely to be repeated over and over again by the followers of Jesus, for their form was conducive to both memorization and repetition" (127).

Another example of Jesus' clarity is his use of the object lesson, a practical illustration or example. In John 13, Jesus effectively used the object lesson when he washed the disciples' feet. The concept he was teaching is the importance of humility and service to one's fellow humans.

To illustrate he "took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist...and he began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (v.4,5). In a land and at a time when most people walked along dusty roads to travel anywhere, it was customary to have one's feet washed whenever one entered a home. This task was reserved for the lowliest of servants. Jesus used this fact to his advantage to drive home his point. To the shock and surprise of his disciples, Jesus was taking on this role. When he finished he said, "Do you understand what I have done for you?...I have set an example for you that you should do as I have done for you...Now that you know these things you will be blessed if you do them" (v.12-17). All the components of an object lesson are shown: demostration, evaluation, explanation, and application. Weigle observes, "Jesus identified himself with his message. He lived it. He proclaimed and taught... not only by what he said, but by what he did and was" (99).

Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) is known as the "father of the object lesson." He believed all learning comes through the senses and teaching should likewise be sensory. To this end he "devised" the object lesson. Pestalozzi urged that lessons be based on sense experience originating in the learner's home and family life (Ornstein, Levine 128). What could be more sensory than getting one's filthy feet washed? Or more related to home life than watching one's master wash one's feet like a common household servant? Jesus seemed to agree with Pestalozzi's principles of the effective use of the object lesson.

Comenius (1592-1670), a pioneer in educational reform, proposed nine principles of teaching. The first three state: 1) teaching should involve presentation of the object or idea in a concrete and direct way; 2) teaching should involve practical application to everyday life; 3) whatever is taught should be presented in a straightfoward and uncomplicated way (Ornstein, Levine 121). Jesus' clear teaching methodology and style embodied these principles. Indeed "straightfoward" and "uncomplicated" accurately describe

Jesus' teaching. I see obvious and immeasurable value in clarity of teaching. For is teaching that is unclear actually teaching? I think not. Instruction, edification, correction, encouragement, motivation, evaluation, even self-actualization are all a part of education. These do not occur amid confusion or complication; but rather through clarity of message, transparency of thought, and forthrightness of teaching. According to my philosophy, teaching, by definition, is clear—and that Jesus exemplified in his teaching.

Glover's conviction, noted at the beginning of this paper, is also my own: "It is worth our study to understand how [Jesus taught]–to master his methods." By mastering his methods, by studying his teaching style, I as a future educator can gain insight into not only how to teach effectively, but how to be an effective teacher. For an effective teacher does more than simply educate or meet objectives; he or she relates to students, motivates them to higher-level thinking, does not discriminate between them, captures their attention, does not confuse them, but rather meets them at their level. Jesus demonstrated this effectiveness supurbly in his teaching style and methodology, which can be described as informal, picturesque, and clear. This description is also accurate concerning my own teaching style and methodology. My teaching philosophy states that students learn more in an informal, relaxed environment in which they feel comfortable with their teacher, when their minds are engaged and their attention captured, and when material is presented at their level in a clear, easy to understand manner. All this can be seen in Jesus' teaching–teaching that captured hearers like Nicodemus, who declared, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God" (John 3:2).

Works Cited

Bornkamm, Gunther. Jesus of Nazareth. New York: Harper & Row, 1960.

Branscomb, Harvie. The Teachings of Jesus. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1931.

Derrett, John Duncan M. Jesus's Audience: The Social and Psychological Environment in which He Worked. U.S.A.: Seabury Press, 1973.

Fosdick, Harry Emerson. The Man From Nazareth as His Contemporaries Saw Him. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949.

Hinson, E. Glenn. Jesus Christ. U.S.A.: McGrath, 1977. Trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey and James M. Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1960.

The Holy Bible (New International Version). Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

Horne, Herman Harrell. Jesus—The Master Teacher. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1964.

Laymon, Charles M. The Life and Teachings of Jesus. New York: Abingdon, 1962.

Ornstein, Allan C. and David U. Levine. Foundations of Education. 4th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

Rhein, Francis Bayard. An Analytical Approach to the New Testament. Woodbury: Barron's Educational Series, 1966.

Tilden, Elwyn E. Jr. Toward Understanding Jesus. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1956.

Vacca, Richard T. and Jo Anne L. Vacca. Content Area Reading. 3rd ed. U.S.A.: Harper-Collins, 1989.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1986.

Weigle, Luther Allan. Jesus and the Educational Method. New York: Abingdon, 1939.